

WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS A STUDY OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION IN THE NORTHERN PART, MALAYSIA

Nurulhazany binti Halim¹ & Dr. Ruslan Zainuddin²

School of Government, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok

Abstract Several women are disadvantaged in the four northern state of Malaysia based on gender and associated challenges; nevertheless, a majority of these women desired to fight for positions in respective of their educational background for empowerment. The aim of this study will be to examine people's perception on women participation in politics. Qualitative research design will be adopted for the study. Data will be collected with the Interview Schedule for public and members of the major political parties in the region 20 participants which comprises both male and female in the four state. The purposive sampling is to select cases rich with information that will enhance the questions being studied. The focus of the data collection will be on the challenges of women participation in politics. The purpose of this study was to examine issues that prevent women from participate or aspire to get to elected positions in the states under this study. In addition, data was collected and analyzed using inductive coding procedures to categorize the general' challenges of women participation in political processes. The implication of this study is to contribute to political, social, family, and governing process to change the general public opinion on the women participation in politics by informing parties and government administrators on the enabling environments for the women to realise their dreams and aspirations in life.

Key word: Women Participation, Public Perception, Challenges, Gender Issues.

Introduction

It is of great importance to see how women has been given opportunity from the local to the global level, women's leadership and political participation are restricted generally speaking. Women are underrepresented as voters, as well as in leading positions, whether in elected office, the civil service, the private sector or academia, the list is endless. This occurs despite their proven abilities as leaders and agents of change in their various endeavours in life, and their right to participate equally in democratic governance at all levels.

Sepoe, (2002) stated that women face several obstacles to participating in political life. Structural barriers through discriminatory laws and institutions still limit women's options to run for office. In capacity gaps mean women are less likely than men to have the education, contacts

and resources needed to become effective leaders in the society and many are relegated to domestic work alone.

Despite the stated communique of the 2011 UN General Assembly that, resolved on women's political participation notes, "Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women" (UN Women, 2011).

Individual women have overcome these obstacles with great acclaim, and often to the benefit of society at large. But for women as a whole, the playing field needs to be level, opening opportunities for all.

With these in mind the researcher decided to examine the public perception on women participation in political processes and the

challenges faced by women in the northern part of Malaysia which comprises of Perak, Pulau Pinang, Kedah and Perlis.

Women representations in elective positions or offices

Women's involvement in political activities in Malaysia has become apparent since 1945. While earlier, women's political roles were limited only to campaigning and voting, more recently, it is estimated that less than 5 percent of women are formally involved in politics and compete as candidates or parliamentary and state assembly seats. In the recent election of 1995, women's involvement has been relatively encouraging, as 61 women from various political parties competed as candidates. The numbers still remain quite small, constituting only 4.64 percent of the total number of candidates competing for the total number of 586 seats, both at parliamentary (192 seats) and state assembly (394 seats) level (Mustafa, 1999).

Kedah

On 2004 General Election, there are 3 women who compete for election and only 2 win apart from 15 seats for parliament. For state assembly, 6 women compete for seats but only 2 women wins apart from 36 seats. The winning seat for parliament is Baling and Padang Serai and the winning seat for state assembly is Bukit Kayu Hitam and Sungai Tiang. For 2008 General Election, there are no women participation for parliament seats even though there are 15 seats were contested and for state assembly there are 36 seats were contested and 7 women participate during this election and only 3 of them win the election. The winning seat for state assembly is Sungai Tiang, Merbau Pulas and Kulim. For 2013 General Election, there are 15 seats and only 2 women participate during election but unfortunately both of them loose the election, so no women representative in Kedah parliament. For state assembly, 8 women participate for election and the result is 4 of them win the

election and 4 of them loose. Winning seats is Sungai Tiang, Pedu, Merbau Pulas and Bandar Baharu. These are what women representation is as at now in Kedah. (Election Commission of Malaysia)

Pulau Pinang

For 2004 General Election, 3 women compete for parliament seats but only 2 women wins apart from 13 seats. For state assembly, 5 women compete during election and 4 of them win the seats from 40 seats that been contested. Winning seats for parliament is Permatang Pauh and Bukit Mertajam while for state assembly is Telok Air Tawar, Bukit Tengah, Jawi and Telok Bahang. For 2008 General Election, 5 women participate for election but only 2 women win from 13 seats for parliament and 10 women participate for election in state assembly but only 2 women win from 40 seats. Winning seats for parliament is Bukit Mertajam and Permatang Pauh while for state assembly is Bertam and Berapit. During 2013 General Election, 13 seats were contested for parliament in Pulau Pinang and only have 1 representative and she won the election. She win in Batu Kawan. For state assembly, 40 seats were contested, 7 participate for election (5 win and 2 loose). Winning seats is Pulau Tikus, Telok Ayer Tawar, Penanti, Sungai Pinang and Padang Lalang. It shows that women are poorly represented in all seat of power. (Election Commission of Malaysia)

Perak

For 2004 General Election, from 24 seats, 5 women compete for parliament seats and 4 of them win the seats. For state assembly, 59 seats were contested and 4 women compete for election and 3 of them win the seats. The winning seats are Lenggong, Bukit Gantang, Batu Gajah and Kuala Kangsar while winning seats for state assembly are Chenderoh, Hulu Kinta and Sungai Rapat. For 2008 General Election, 4 women participate for parliament and 3

win from 24 seats and 8 women participate in state assembly election and only 6 women win from 59 seats. The winning seats for parliament is Gerik, Batu Gajah and Kuala Kangsar while winning seats for state assembly is Chenderoh, Jalong, Hulu Kinta, Jelapang, Menglembu and Kampong Gajah. In 2013 General Election, for parliament 24 seats were contested, 4 participate for election but all loose. For state assembly 59 seats were contested, 15 women participate for election (7 won, 8 loose) Winning seat is Kuala Sepetang, Pantai Remis, Temengor, Lubok Merbau, Menglembu, Behrang and Tualang Sekah. These are women representation score card in an election that women are the mothers and home builder. (Election Commission of Malaysia)

Perlis

During 2004 General Election, for parliament seats, no women compete for all 3 seats. For state assembly 3 women compete and 2 of them win it apart from 15 seats that were contested. Winning seats for state assembly is Sena and Indera Kayangan. During 2008 General Election there also no women participation and representative in parliament and state assembly. There are 1 women participate in election in state assembly but loose. In 2013 General Election, 3 seats were contested for parliament, no women representative and no women take part as candidate. For state assembly, 15 seat were contested and only have 2 women participate in election and both of them win it. The winning seats is Chuping and Bintong, (Election Commission of Malaysia). It is obvious that women are poorly represented these are motivating factors for the researcher to undergo this study.

Selection of Participants

This qualitative study used purposeful random sampling. According to Patton (2003), purposeful sampling is the selection of cases rich with information that will enhance the questions being studied. The focus of the data collection is on the challenges of women in politics.

Stratifying factors were gender, and race. The 20 files made up the initial sample of prospective applicants. People from the selected region were selected and then contacted the individuals by explaining the study and inviting them to participate in the interview. The selected individuals were provided with my contact information and were later contacted. The study included the first 20 who agreed to participate in the population.

Identifying Study Participants

Patton (2003) identified the sampling strategy used as purposeful sampling. The intent of purposeful sampling is to show different perspectives (Patton, 2003). This case study's focus on the different perspectives of these 20 participants. These experiences include voting and campaigning, having the option to participate in election at one time or the other.

Twenty study participants provided an in depth examination with various perspectives (Patton, 2003). With 20 interviews, the plan was to saturate the data to a point where no new themes emerged. According to Patton (2003), saturation occurs when the new data does not present new information on the phenomenon of study i.e. challenges of women participating in politics.

The guide exists to ensure the same questions are asked to all of the participants. The researcher may have asked additional or follow-up questions during the interview as needed. The use of a semi structured interview guide ensured standardization during the opening of the interview, while obtaining the participants' opinion regarding their experiences. The guide structure of the guide was to solicit information about the women challenges in politics. After answering the final interview question, I thanked each participant for their participation, as well as for providing their valuable insight. The terms of informed consent were discussed and the participants reassured that the transcripts and recording of the interview will be destroyed when no longer needed. After the

participant the researcher left the room, 5-10 minutes were spent making field notes of the observations made during the interview such as the participant's demeanor.

Data Analysis

Ritchie and Lewis (2003) stated that in a qualitative study, the data analysis begins at the start of the study and is a continuous process. The analysis phase includes the examination of large amounts of data to categorize the emerging themes (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). See table below for the data analysis.

Table 1
People's opinions

Participant	Response
A	Women are to be at home taking care of the children and the home not outside
B	They are to support their husband not to rule over their husband
C	Women are raised to be less competitive, less confident and more risk averse than men
D	Women react more negatively than men to many aspects of modern campaigns (eg: negative advertising)
E	Women do not have the same type of networks to access as men do
F	Women do not think they are qualified so they hold themselves back
G	There is a recruitment gap. Women are asked less often than men to run political office
H	women find it difficult to spend their money so they cannot be voted for or win election

(Personal interview 2016)

Challenges of women in politics

Generally speaking men have created a male-based world, which leaves the women at a great disadvantage state continuously. In the current environment, politicians clarify their inspirations for being in politics as including a desire to serve the interest of the people, to help the poor and underprivileged, to help develop the state or the nation, to bring about anticipated changes, to improve the plight of farmers in one's province, to help solve social and economic problems, to fulfil one's dream of removing social injustice and to enhance the fame and status of one's family and lineage at any given stage (Wood, 2014). With all these aspirations of women as pointed out by these scholars. Krook, (2008); PIFS, (2012), women still face many challenges such as enumerated below:

- ❖ Men want to elevate family status and the ultimate political goal involves authority, stature, situation and opportunity. Women's goals are different since they, in the traditional role are homemaker, they have more rational and everyday experience of things. Obvious barriers to women who pursue politics are stereotypes of women as weak, indecisive and emotionally in balance in a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- ❖ Another difficulty to women is their low self-esteem, to which media often contributes by claiming that women do not assert themselves as leadership figures in a society.
- ❖ Political parties ignore/lack gender awareness and gender sensitivity and women are reluctant to spend the amount of money that is generally required for political success for the purpose of being prudent and being responsible to the family and the society.
- ❖ Lack of access to well-developed education and training systems for women's leadership in general, and for orienting young women towards political life.

- ❖ There is little solidarity or sisterhood among women themselves due to one reason or the other, such as my husband party, my father want this and so on.
- ❖ The prevalence of the 'masculine model' of political life and of elected government bodies;
- ❖ Lack of party support, for example, limited financial support for women candidates, limited access to political networks, and the more stringent standards and qualifications applied to women;
- ❖ Lack of sustained contact and cooperation with other public organizations such as trade (labour) unions and women's groups;
- ❖ Culture and stereotyped attitudes of people in the political arena is a great obstacles to women in politics, apart from the family, women are complex to indictments of sexual affairs and adultery, and many women prefer to not expose their families to such public awkwardness.
- ❖ The multiplicity of religious exhibitions, however, does not invalidate all generalizations. Islam is not merely a spiritual principle but the foundation for a way of life, and it is important to consider whether there are behavioral correlates when it comes to women participation in politics, thing to note is that Islam does not share the severe ideals of other religions, has a generally positive attitude toward women been submissive to their husbands as the head of the home and family.
- ❖ Generally speaking the structure of any society can be found in the tradition of the community in which they leave. In such, women's participation in certain issues is more recognized than others. When they act in the capability of mothers, wives and protectors of the family they are able to take strong leadership positions but when they are to lead men, they will be faced with great opposition by the men.

- ❖ Moreover, women usually entered politics late, after their children were of age or grown up to good support from their families, including financial and moral.
- ❖ The nature of the electoral system, which may or may not be favourable to women candidates.
- ❖ Men largely dominate the political arena; largely formulate the rules of the political game; and often define the standards for evaluation
- ❖ Furthermore, political life is systematized according to male norms and values, and in some cases even male lifestyles. For instance, politics is often based on the idea of 'winners and losers', struggle and conflict, rather than on systematic collaboration and consensus, especially across party lines. It may often result in women either rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male-style politics. Thus, when women do participate in politics, they tend to do so in small numbers.

However, women also have many strengths: with less overstated egos they are excellent mediators. The foundation of gender inequality will not be solved by the mere increase in the number of women in politics but given equal playing ground to everyone.

Public perception on women participation in politics

Firstly, in the world generally, people have one thing or the other against women, in Malaysia and indeed the four northern part of Malaysia is not exceptional, women who are actively participating in politics are seen and treated as free women of easy virtues, stubborn people, lack respect for their husbands, too domineering, cultural rebellions, etc. It is observed that during campaign, the political opponents (mostly men) use the alleged loose moral standing of these women against them and often insult them directly in public. Thus, they are often subjected to public ridicule and are socially stigmatized by both men and women (Nwankwo, 2005). The use of

negative labeling; derogatory names and what have you; abusive language and expressions to describe Malaysia women in politics discourage many of them from active participation in the nation's politics. Secondly, most poor women political aspirants do not enjoy family support financially, socially, and morally. The women political aspirants/politicians lack support of their fellow women politically which is a major challenge to their active participation in politics. It is unfortunate that women in Malaysia do not have expected confidence in the leadership abilities of their fellow women and do not support them to win elections, come to think of this if every women decided to support their fellow women and not their husband party or father's choice there will be a great impact in the participation of women in politics. Although, factors like envy, jealousy, and other problems associated with interpersonal relations are common with women, generally, most women would rather vote or support men to win election than their fellow women.

Lastly, many women psychologically are regard and perceive as social stigma by some people with the view that politics is a "dirty game" and as such tend to wrongly perceive fellow women into politics as arrogant and irresponsible women and want to pull them down to uphold the sanctity of a home maker who is the woman (Yahaya, 2012). As a result of this syndrome, most Malaysia women dread politics to retain their good personality traits and not break their matrimonial home (for the married ones). Another serious challenge to women active participation in politics in Malaysia is lack of media support. Most of the political feats of women in Malaysia cultural histories are not properly stated / documented or down-played to make them irrelevant to the national history and heritage mainly because of the patriarchal nature of nation.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the global issue of goal 3 (to promote gender equality and empower

women) of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other international clarion calls for bridging the gap created by long-term discriminations against women and making women viable in politics made Malaysia to recognize women in the political sphere, and include them in both appointive and elective positions. It is no doubt that women still remain highly marginalized, discriminated against; and are under-represented in political life of the nation. This is more obvious when the proportion of men to women in politics and decision making positions is compared despite the fact that women represent 50% of the nation's population. Several challenges that Malaysia women still face in active participation in politics such as discriminatory socio-cultural and religious practices; lack of finance; under-representation of women in governance; unhealthy political environment; political party discrimination; wrong perception of women in politics; lack of family, fellow women and media support; indigenization of women political aspirants; among others, have been identified as responsible for this state of affair. Thus, the recommended measures to guarantee women active participation in politics in the northern part of Malaysia included review of discriminatory practices; economic empowerment; support from family, fellow women and media; equal representation in governance; healthy political environment; proper perception of women in politics.

Recommendations

On the premises of this conclusion, the following recommendations are made;

Review of Discriminatory Practices

Discriminatory socio-cultural and religious practices against women active participation in politics should be positively reviewed by stakeholders (particularly traditional/religious rulers, political parties and government) who should be educated

to be gender sensitive and encouraged to protect women politically and other rights and ensure support of their political desires. These stakeholders should ensure that cultural/religious practices that discriminate against women are discouraged and their perpetrators are adequately punished to serve as deterrent measures other who intend to do same at all level.

Economic Empowerment of Women

Every women should be given equal access to credit facilities like their men counterpart and factors of production like land and labour just like men to enhance their output and income generation. The discriminatory laws of inheritance, succession and land tenure; and collateral of husband's consent for granting loans to women which deny them the legal ownership and possible access to credit facilities should be eliminated completely. In addition, government should adopt and strictly enforce deliberate policy frameworks and empowering programmes by all the women in these states of northern part.

Support from Family, Fellow Women, General Public and Media

Every family members (especially husbands of married women) should give women political aspirants the relevant consent and support to venture into politics and governance at all levels of governance. Through awareness campaign and voters' education programmes, women should be informed of their political rights to participate actively in politics not only as voters but also to be voted for in the numerous political positions and be encouraged to be supported and voted for by their fellow women political aspirants/politicians. Furthermore, media should support women political aspirants/politicians by publicly projecting their positive images and showcasing their talent to boast their chances; emphasizing their important roles and contributions to national development; raising their participation awareness in politics and governance; deploring discriminations against them among others. The gender

stereotypes in the media should be discouraged and abolished completely.

Equal Representation in Governance

There should be equal representation of both men and women in governance to ensure that enacting laws of the land and making policies particularly to those affecting gender issues will always remain equitable. There should be enabling Constitutional amendment to ensure equitable appointive and elective positions in governance for meaningful national development, it is generally noted that women are good managers since they manage the affairs of the home. The national legislations should comply with International standards established in various international treaties and instruments for elimination of discrimination against women and to capture the interest of women through adequate representation in all levels. Political empowerment of women cannot be overemphasis, especially through the strengthening of affirmative action and allocation of quota for women in politics and decision making positions should be strictly implemented to encourage their active participation in politics.

Proper Perception of Women in Politics

The use of negative labelling, derogatory names, abusive language and expressions to describe women in politics should be discouraged completely through sensitization and public enlightenment campaigns. The campaigns of male political opponents that portray women as acting against the religion, culture, family, etc. of not accepting leadership roles of women just to marginalize them should be discouraged. In Malaysia, women in politics should be properly perceived as partners of their male counterparts in politics and governance of the nation or the state they are located.

Reference

- Election Commission of Malaysia (2013) Malaysia 13th general election report. Retrieved at: http://resultpru13.spr.gov.my/module/keputusan/paparan/paparan_Laporan.php
- Kolawale, T. O., Abubakar, M. B., Owonibi, E. & Adebayo, A. A. (2012). "Gender and Party Politics in Africa with Reference to Nigeria." *Journal of Education Research*, 1(7), 132-144.
- Krook, M. (2008) 'Quota laws for women in politics: Implications for feminist practice', *Social Politics: International studies in gender, state and society*, 15:3, 345-368.
- Mustafa MB. (1999). Women's political participation in Malaysia: the non-Bumiputra's perspective. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 5 (2), p: 15
- Patton, M.Q. (2003). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. (3rd Ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- PIFS (2012) *Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration*, 30 August 2012, Rarotonga, Cook Islands.
- Ritchie, J. and Lewis. J. (eds.) (2003) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. Sage Publications, London.
- Sepoe, O. (2002) 'to make a difference: Realities of women's participation in Papua New Guinea politics', *Development Bulletin*, 59, 39-42.
- Northern region (2016, September, 05). Retrieved at <http://www.2malaysia.com/states.htm>
- Nwankwo, O. (2005). *Gender inequality and political proceeding of a national tribunal on the violation of political rights of women in Nigeria*. Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co., LTD
- UN Women (2011) Ending violence against women and girls: Evidence, data and knowledge in the Pacific Island countries. Suva: UN Women
- Wood, T. (2014). *Why can't women win? Impediments to female electoral success in Solomon Islands*, Centre for Democratic Institutions, Discussion Paper 2014/1. Canberra: ANU
- Yahaya, A. (2012). "Muslim Women and Political Participation in Nigeria" *Paper Presented at the Nigerian Muslim and Democracy Conference* Abuja.